



Vietnam veteran Howard Berkowitz, of Highland Mills, left, and Rep. John Hall talk about a bill that would streamline the steps for vets with PTSD to qualify for disability pay. Times Herald-Record/JEFF GOULDING

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HIGHLAND MILLS — By the time Howard Berkowitz asked the government to compensate him for the psychological trauma he suffered as an enlisted soldier during the Vietnam War, having to recall details of long-ago events made his claim nearly impossible to prove.

The Department of Veterans Affairs demanded he document at least one traumatic incident, forcing Berkowitz and a friend to track down the names of old comrades to substantiate a

serious training-camp mishap he witnessed almost 40 years ago.

"They say that they're helping you," Berkowitz said of the federal agency. "But you're really left to do this yourself."

Rep. John Hall visited Berkowitz at his Highland Mills home on Monday to highlight the difficulty veterans may face in claiming disability pay for post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD — and to promote legislation that would ease their burden of proof.

Under a bill Hall introduced last year, veterans diagnosed with PTSD would no longer be required to document an event that contributed to their condition. Merely to show that they served in a combat zone would be enough.

"The presumption should be with the veteran, not against the veteran," said Hall, D-Dover Plains, chairman of a House subcommittee that oversees veterans' disability claims.

According to Hall's office, roughly 115,000 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with PTSD, but only 53,000 have been approved for disability pay. All told, the Department of Veterans Affairs has a backlog of nearly 1 million pending disability applications.

Berkowitz, who was stationed in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969 and has other health problems attributed to exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange, first applied for PTSD disability pay in November 2006; he finally got approval about a month ago, after Hall's office intervened.

He said Monday that having veterans document their wartime experiences for disability claims forces them to relive the incidents that caused psychological wounds, which "just exacerbates the symptoms."

His only hope in speaking about them on Monday, he added, was to ease the application process for other disabled veterans.

New bill would help vets with PTSD receive benefits

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